

Becoming Familia: The Need for Bilingual Children's Literature

An Honors Thesis (499)

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Abstract

Children's literature has been around for centuries, yet this literature is not universally relatable to all children. Most children's literature reflects the perspective of majority groups while students from minoritized backgrounds have their perspectives ignored and/or misrepresented. In my time as a pre-service teacher, I have noticed, in particular, a lack of literature that supports bilingual students as well as a lack of literature that shows families that have been brought together by adoption. The book *Becoming Familia* was created to serve both of these purposes. I used research that showed the lack of diversity in children's literature to inform the process of how I wrote the book. *Becoming Familia* tells a story that is missing from children's literature while leaving space for readers to add their own reflections into the story. This is supported by research that indicates that students benefit from seeing their own perspective, and the perspective of others reflected in the literature that they read.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Dr. Kristin Cipollone for advising me on the project. Since taking a class of hers my freshman year I have admired the expertise she brings to the field of education. Her help on this project has helped make it more accessible, analytical, and focused.

Secondly, I would like to thank Lindsay Alessandri for nurturing my love of Spanish in high school, and helping with the editing process.

I would also like to thank my parents, Mark and Desiree, for their endless encouragement. I am incredibly grateful for my brother Curtis, as well, who came into our family at 16 months old and changed it for the better. Thank you for inspiring me to write this story to help other adopted children see themselves represented in literature.

Process Analysis Statement

What Is *Becoming Familia*?

Becoming Familia is first and foremost a bilingual children's book. This project incorporates a lot more than that, but the starting point for the creation of this book was the bilingual aspects. After that was decided, I knew I wanted to make a book in which children could see themselves. There is not a lot of literature for children about adoption and my family personally struggled with this when we adopted my brother, Curtis. My parents looked for books about children who were adopted so that he could see his perspective reflected, but they were unable to find anything. On top of the struggle to find books with families that looked like ours, it was hard to find books with children that looked like him. Curtis was adopted from Guatemala and has beautiful brown skin. In the few books we could find featuring adopted families, all of the characters were White.

It was also hard to find books that addressed his language situation. At 16 months old, he was already accustomed to Spanish and we only spoke English. My parents found some books in Spanish to help make Curtis feel more comfortable. They also searched for bilingual books to help reflect Curtis's reality. However, as they continued to look, they found that few books were available that had bilingual content—a trend that remains today. This pushed me to tell a story loosely based off of my own families' experience. I made the intentional decision to use Black and White drawings for the book. It is important to note that this was not done in an attempt to be "colorblind." It is problematic to ignore race and pretend that a person's experiences are not affected by race. The idea behind using Black and White drawings was that it would prevent the reader from making assumptions about the race of the characters in the book, and instead creates

a space where readers are able to insert themselves into the literature. If this book were to ever be published and sold, I would want it to be sold with crayons that show a full range of flesh tones (along with other colors) to allow readers to color the book to match their reality and makes a story that represents their experiences as closely as possible .

Once I decided this was how I wanted to proceed, I ran into a major roadblock. I have no experience in drawing or art. However, my brother Curtis loves to draw. I decided to ask him to be my illustrator. I believe this creates a much more authentic book as he was able to reflect upon his own perspectives with adoption through the drawings. Because of this I'm not just telling the story from my outsider perspective, but instead, allowing space for his story to be told in a way that is true to him and relatable to others.

Why was *Becoming Familia* Written?

There are many reasons that I decided to write *Becoming Familia*. The first was the lack of bilingual children's literature available. As someone who has studied English as a second language education, I have learned about the importance of supporting students' use of languages other than English. While we have learned that this is best practice through my time at Ball State University, it is extremely difficult to find materials to put this into practice. In the United States, the population is becoming increasingly more bilingual. According to The United States Census Bureau's website, 21.9% of citizens speak a language other than English in the home. This translates to more than one in every five people. However, children's literature does not reflect this.

The majority of children's literature reflects the White, monolingual perspective. In fact, according to the School Library Journal and the University of Wisconsin, in 2018 there were more children's books published about animals and non-human characters than about people

from minoritized backgrounds. As of 2018, 50% of the children's books that were published were about White people, 27% were about animals and other things, 10% were about African / African Americans, 7% were about Asian Pacific Islanders / Asian Pacific Americans, 5% were about the Latinx community and 1% were about American Indianans and people from the First Nations. In looking at these statistics, it is easy to see that some students see themselves reflected much more than others.

Though there have been some improvements in recent years, the difference in representation is still a major issue, and affects learning. For example, it has been found that African American students who read exclusively culturally relevant texts while participating in a ten-week afterschool program made significantly more gains in comprehension than their counterparts who did not read culturally relevant texts and those who read them intermittently. As well, they had significantly more gains in the area of contextual word recognition than their counterparts who did not read culturally relevant texts (Clark, 2017). This is important because representation sends a message; it tells us who is seen as important in the world. When a person never sees themselves represented, it sends the message that their identity is not valued, and this can be disaffirming. However, when a student is repeatedly able to access books that reflect their experiences, it lets them know that they are valued. Students need to have access to texts that reflect their experiences. When we as teachers do not provide our students with access to these texts, and include them in our teaching, we are potentially holding some of our students back from growing and learning to their full potential.

Additionally, these books usually feature two-parent families where the parents are in a heterosexual relationship, and they often do not include adopted children or families that are made up of half siblings, step siblings, or any of the other ways families may come together. I

wanted to create a space where children and other readers could insert themselves into the story and hopefully see a perspective that is not often reflected. This is because it can be damaging for students from minoritized backgrounds to never see themselves reflected in literature.

Now, I realize that in my story, Leo, the main character, is male and he is adopted by a family with heterosexual parents. This is because that is my family's story, and it is what I felt comfortable writing. However, when I asked my brother to draw a page that focused on other families, he took it upon himself to include a single mother, two men in a relationship, a long-distance relationship, as well as some families with children. I didn't tell him exactly which families to include. Rather, I told him to draw all the different ways he thought families come together. In my opinion, this page, though not the heart of the story, sends a message of validation for all family types, and hopefully allows readers to feel represented and validated.

It can be easy to assume that including culturally relevant children's literature in one's classroom will only benefit students from minoritized backgrounds. However, it is beneficial to all students. On top of the above-mentioned benefits for students who do not often see themselves reflected, it can also help students who see themselves reflected too often. Reading about experiences that differ from one's own experiences can help students develop a sense of empathy and cultural awareness that would not be possible if they only saw their own experiences in the literature to which they have access (Style, 1988).

Another reason this book was written was to support children who are adopted by White, monolingual families. There is a lot that goes into these stories both in terms of race and language. However, in my family's experience, we have made a conscious and intentional decision to support my brother's use of Spanish (when he wants too) and to frequently talk about the place that he is from—to all of our benefit. My parents even plan to take him to Guatemala

when he is a senior in high school so that he can learn more about where he came from, and from there decide how his adoption and nationality of birth will affect his identity.

Translingual, transracial, and transnational adoptions are complex. These adoptions can do amazing things as far as bringing families together, however, it would be inappropriate to ignore the fact that they often come with complicated racial and linguistic implications. These are important to investigate as “transnational adoptions by American parents tripled between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s...Although these adoptions have declined since 2004, the United States continues to participate in a higher number of transnational adoptions than any other country” (Khannah and Killian, 2015 p. 570). Because of this, we must keep in mind that racially and linguistically blended families are becoming more prevalent in our society.

When looking at these adoptions through the context of our society, it is important for us to look at the power dynamics. As human beings, we often tie race and language into who we are and how we identify. In our society, it remains beneficial to be White. The definition of “Whiteness” is not necessarily specific, however being White usually comes with privilege and powers the other races are not afforded. Thus, when White families adopt children of other races, they must be aware that they cannot fully grasp the way that race will impact their child’s identity or their experiences in the world. Parents who have adopted children from different linguistic and racial backgrounds need to be aware of their lack of knowledge about that identity and be willing to seek support of those more knowledgeable than them. Further, White parents need to better understand their own racial and linguistic identities and how they have influenced their lives.

In general, White families in the United States see themselves as “normal,” and they often do not see themselves as having a racial or linguistic existence. This is because “the

characteristics and attributes of those who are privileged group members are described as societal norms—as the way things are and as what is normal and society” (Wildman and Davis, 2014, pp.112-113). Therefore, these families have to go beyond learning about their child’s identities. They must also be willing to be self-reflective, and evaluate where they may have blind spots, or make judgments based on their own experiences. This is especially important for White, monolingual families because “this normalization of privilege means that members of society are judged, and succeed or fail, measured against the characteristics that are held by those privileged” (Wildman and Davis, 2014, p.113). It is essential that these families realize the societal impact and normalization of their privilege. This can help them to navigate these adoptions in ways that are more empathetic, and help their child navigate a world where they may lack certain privileges.

When my parents adopted my brother, they went to a class at the adoption agency that was taught by children from minoritized backgrounds who were adopted into White, English-speaking families. They emphasized the importance of making sure to support linguistic learning from the nation of origin. They also emphasized the importance of making sure to take children to the correct barber to make sure that their hair is taken care of properly. This may seem like an unimportant thing, particularly if one is White, however, the way that people care for their hair is different based on societal and cultural norms, as well as what is best for the hair type. Though these things seem small, they guided my family towards realizing that our situation has complicated racial and linguistic implications.

My parents realized early on that there was going to be a lot for Curtis to unpack regarding race, ethnicity, and being a part of the United States when he was not born here. Though our family has tried to support him as best we can, there are still pieces missing. Overall,

there is not a lot of representation of children in his situation, including in children's literature. Because of this, I decided that *Becoming Familia* would be bilingual, and not just repeated sentences written into different languages.

The United States has no official language. Unfortunately, however, given the majority culture of the United States, English is the *de facto* language and many bilingual people are forced to go back and forth between English and their other language(s). This is called code-switching. This practice becomes necessary when a majority culture refuses to allow those outside the norm to be themselves, and instead ask bilingual people to conform to the majority's linguistic expectations. Knowing this, I wanted to create a book that goes back and forth between English and Spanish as this skill should be celebrated, and not repressed. Therefore, *Becoming Familia* makes full use of both English and Spanish.

The use of the both languages can benefit bilingual and monolingual children alike. Rudine Simms Bishop introduces the metaphor of windows and mirrors in her essay "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" published in 1990. Windows allow readers to see the perspective of others in the literature. Mirrors allow for students to see their own perspective reflected. It is beneficial for students to have both windows and mirrors in their literature, meaning that they need to learn about other perspectives but also see their own perspective and experiences reflected. However, this is rarely the case, particularly for students outside the dominant group. Those belonging to dominant cultural groups are much more likely to see mirrors and to be validated in their own perspective. This often leads to majority groups not seeing the perspective of others in literature. When this happens over a long period of time, members of the majority culture have their perspective reinforced. This can lead to a sense of self-centeredness and ethnocentrism. In our society, it is often the perspective of White, English-

speaking individuals who see their experiences reflected, which can diminish their ability to see other groups with empathy. This means they cannot see themselves in the experiences of other, leading to lack of understanding and compassion due to the assumption that their “normal” is how everyone experiences the world. The opposite is true for people belonging to minoritized populations. They are much more likely to see windows, through which they see the dominant culture reflected, and are much less likely to see mirrors, where their own perspectives reflected, which can lead to a lack of validation.

“Now, the common sense of needing to provide both windows and mirrors in the curriculum may seem unnecessary to emphasize, and yet recent scholarship on women and men of color attests abundantly to the copious blind spots of the traditional curriculum” (Style, 1988, p. 4). Thus, it’s not just literature where people from minoritized groups do not see themselves reflected; curriculums used in schools also fail to comprehensively reflect all groups. This may not seem like a big deal, however it is because it is through education and the media that we as a society come to recognize what is considered to be normal. When we leave out entire groups of people and do not validate them, whole perspectives can be ignored and normal can be a very narrow view.

The shortcomings of having such a narrow view can be hard to see for those in the dominant group but are often felt by almost everyone who does not fall into the majority group:

Women and men of color, on the other hand, find almost no mirrors of themselves in the house of curriculum; for them it is often all windows. White males are thereby encouraged to be solipsistic, and the rest of us to feel uncertain that we truly exist. In Western education, the gendered perspective of the White male has presented itself as

‘universal’ for so long that the limitations of this curriculum are often still invisible.

(Style, 1988 p.4)

All of these aspects came together in a way that pushed me to create *Becoming Familia*. I wanted to have a project that put something into the world that would be useful and validating. Because of all of the help I have received from my professors at Ball State University, and from my family, I believe this project accomplishes that goal. It was written to be a book that validates people who do not often get the validation from society; to show that their perspective matters.

Best Practices for Supporting Students in and through Literature

There is not always agreement about what constitutes best practice when it comes to the field of education. However, I believe if authors engage themselves in research and implement such research in their writing, they are better able to create literature that is beneficial for young readers. It is very important for teachers to investigate best practices, as teachers tend to be overwhelmingly monolingual, White, women. However, not all students belong to that group. Because of this, sometimes perspectives are missing in teaching curriculum. This means that teachers need to be constantly thinking critically about the curriculum they are using, the practices they are applying to their teaching, and their own identities. All teachers need to be aware that perspectives exist outside their own and investigate research about how to teach all students and address all perspectives.

To be explicit, a best practice is to engage culturally relevant and responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This best practice requires educators to be explicit in providing windows and mirrors to all students. Now, this tends to be difficult because educators overwhelmingly tend to be White middle-class women—who, as mentioned earlier often see

themselves as the societal norm and therefore are unaware of role their race, class, and language play in their experiences—while students are not. It is important for teachers to look beyond their own lenses and their own experiences, and make sure the materials they are providing address the needs and experiences of every single one of their students. When this does not happen, educators fail students. It is also important for educators to realize that schools tend to reflect the dominant culture and thus often do not include students from marginalized, minoritized backgrounds. Schools reproduce cultural norms and the values that are taught in school tend to be reflective of the dominant culture. Educators have a responsibility to challenge the status quo in schools so as to serve all children well.

Thus, having culturally responsive literature and materials in a classroom allows teachers to better include and validate all students and all identities, and widen students' perspectives. However, this needs to be done intentionally, as most of the materials used in schools are reflective of the dominant culture. When we fail to search out culturally responsive materials and literature for students, we participate, actively, in the isolation of students who do not fit in to the dominant cultural groups. It is not only best practice, but a necessity for teachers to provide the windows and mirrors through culturally relevant materials to all of their students.

Kokkola (2013) discusses how the monolingual student is taken as the norm. However, she claims that the majority of the world's population uses more than one language in their daily life. She moves on to discuss how in most education systems model language students set the norms by which all readers, including bilingual readers, are measured. She encourages her readers to look at this through a critical lens. She then goes on to discuss bilingualism and multilingualism. She claims the children growing up in bi- or multilingual environments can

develop slightly differently from monolingual children of the same age. Their brain lateralization can take longer and more of their language functions can be placed in the right hemisphere.

Kokkola argues that multilingual literature has a key role in helping multilingual students' brains develop. This goes beyond the social and emotional importance that goes along with supporting a child's other language use. When readers are engaging with both (or all) of their languages, this activates their brain to make greater use of the right hemisphere. The implication is that bilingual readers have special skills. Thus, it is up to teachers to continue to investigate how to capitalize on this in the classroom. My hope is that *Becoming Familia* addresses this specific concern for students who speak both Spanish and English. I hope to nurture, in all ways, students who are bilingual and affirm them. On top of this validation, I hope my book provides them with a resource they can use that will help with their brain development.

In addition to considering language, I was also thinking about racial representation. Castagno (2008) investigates how teachers can participate in "silence" regarding race. She found that many educators insisted on not having discussions about race even though our education system is affected by racial structures. This means that all of the racist attitudes and the matrix of power that exist in society bleed over into education. Our culture's lack of appreciation for diversity and lack of attention to perspective also affect our education system, and teachers need to be aware of that constantly. Through her research, Castagno (2008) found a pattern of silence and active silencing by educators. In other words, the teachers in her study actively avoided the use of race words and things of that nature, such as encouraging discussions about race and answering students' race-based question. She implies that teachers are afraid to talk about race. This can make getting resources that deal with race into classrooms more difficult. However, educators must keep in mind that while a student's race does not define every aspect of who they

are, it will likely affect their life experiences. Therefore, teachers need to provide resources that allow students to work through their experiences with race.

Unfortunately, it is common in our society for people to attempt to be “colorblind.” This is when people attempt to avoid conversations about race in the hopes of treating all people equally. This mentality can be seen in the common phrase: “I don’t see race; I just see people.” The issue with this attitude, especially when teachers employ it, is that it does not allow the differences in people’s experiences due to their race to be acknowledged—in fact, it minimizes the role of race. In a classroom, this can be especially problematic, as it can bleed into all areas of learning. All children must be affirmed in the classroom; if their race is ignored, they cannot be affirmed. Every single subject can be contextualized and made to be culturally responsive, however “colorblind teachers” often miss the opportunities to think critically about the curriculum they are teaching, and in turn, take away opportunities for students to engage in what they are learning in a more culturally relevant way.

For example, when teaching about slavery in the United States, a “colorblind” teacher will often teach history as it is prescribed in the textbook. And while a history textbook may talk about race, there is no way that teaching from it alone will encourage students to think critically about race and how it affects their lives. However, a teacher who is not “colorblind” will be more likely to connect the past with today, and have the students talk about their own experiences with race. These discussions can then be used as a springboard to talk about racism and privilege, and through this teaching, students can make connections and meaning from the content.

Though the illustrations in *Becoming Familia* are in Black and White and do not specifically address race, my hope is that by reading the preface, readers will understand that this was done so they would be able to insert themselves into the story. My hope is that young

readers will be able to add color to the pages to reflect their own perspective without have a prescribed idea on what the races of the characters should be, and thus have a book where they feel more represented. The second reason behind this is the hope that this process will spark discussions among families, especially families like mine that are White and monolingual and who have adopted children from other areas of the globe. The photo at the end of my story, drawn by my brother Curtis a few years ago, shows his perspective of how our family looks. I want all children who read this book to be able to engage in that process. Hopefully, their families will come to discuss race and through that, validate their children's experiences.

Personal Impact

This story is incredibly important to me and my family. It was the kind of story my parents looked to get my little brother growing up, but it was one that was not readily available. It was nearly impossible to find any children's literature that talked about adoption, let alone adoption in a positive light. In the few instances when we found books, adoption was discussed with negativity. For example, the parents had passed away and the adoptive family was abusive. It was even more difficult to locate books that discussed transracial adoption. Often in books about adoption, all the characters are of the same nationality. Though this may be the case for some, it ignores whole populations of adoptees.

As mentioned above, it is incredibly important to have mirrors in literature for students to see themselves. While I realize one book will not change the world, and that my story may not resonate with all adoptees, I hope it is a place to start. The process of creating this book also brought my attention to some of the complicated things that go into transnational, transracial, and translingual adoptions. Even though my brother is adopted from Guatemala, growing up, I missed seeing the effects of a lot of these things because I did not know to look for them. Being a

White woman from a predominantly White area, I was completely unaware of how important it is to support a person's racial identity. I was also unaware of how experiences are shaped by race, including my own. There is a lot that goes into transracial, transnational, and translingual adoptions, and those that find their families this way need be supported in all aspects of their lives, and this includes being reflected in literature.

Conclusion

My intention in creating this book is that it would encourage more families to talk about their story and how they came together. All readers need to see their own perspectives reflected sometimes, and I hope that this book provides a mirror to those who need it. I also hope this book provides a window, a look into what life is like for someone who is adopted. People whose families did not come together through adoption still need to see this perspective. *Becoming Familia* can help them learn about others, and maybe even help them to be a better friend or relative to someone who has experiences like those shared in the book. I hope that it can be a good resource for educators as well. This book can be used as a whole-class resource to spark discussions about identity, experience, and empathy. It can also be provided in a classroom library for individual use. The purpose of having this book available for individuals is to help students who relate to the story to feel validation through literature.

My hope for *Becoming Familia* is to create mirrors for those who do not get them, and a window for those who have not had these experiences to learn about them. If this book makes even one reader feel more validated in their experiences, then I have done my job. I hope to put a copy of this book in my future classroom. It may not be every year that I have students who will relate to this, but likely I will run into someone who could use the message in the story. All in all, this book is a tool for teaching students how to see things from another perspective, and to

build empathy. Many young students will benefit from learning about a family structure that is different from their own. I know that one book will not change a student's entire perspective, however, I hope that this book can spark a sense of hope and love in those who read *Becoming Familia* now and in time to come.

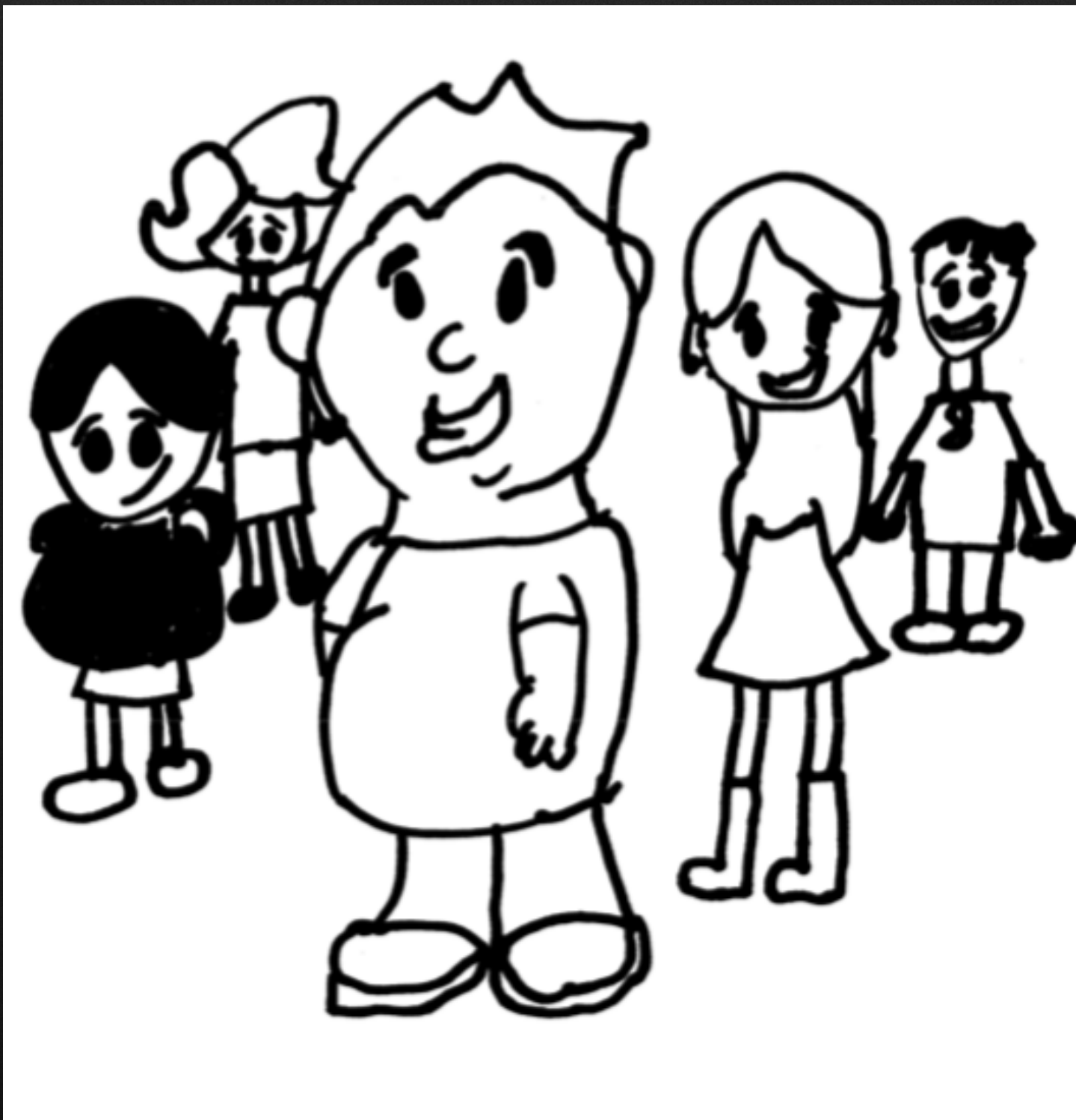
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Becoming Familia

BY CAROLYN WOODRUFF - PICTURES BY CURTIS WOODRUFF



Why Becoming Familia

This book has always been a dream of mine to create. As a pre-service educator, I have worked with all sorts of children's books, and in my time noticed a lack of representation for adoption and bilingualism. Because of this, when I had the opportunity to create this book for my Honor's College thesis at Ball State University, I jumped on the idea. I included a few features which I would love to share with you before you begin your reading journey.

Black and White Pictures

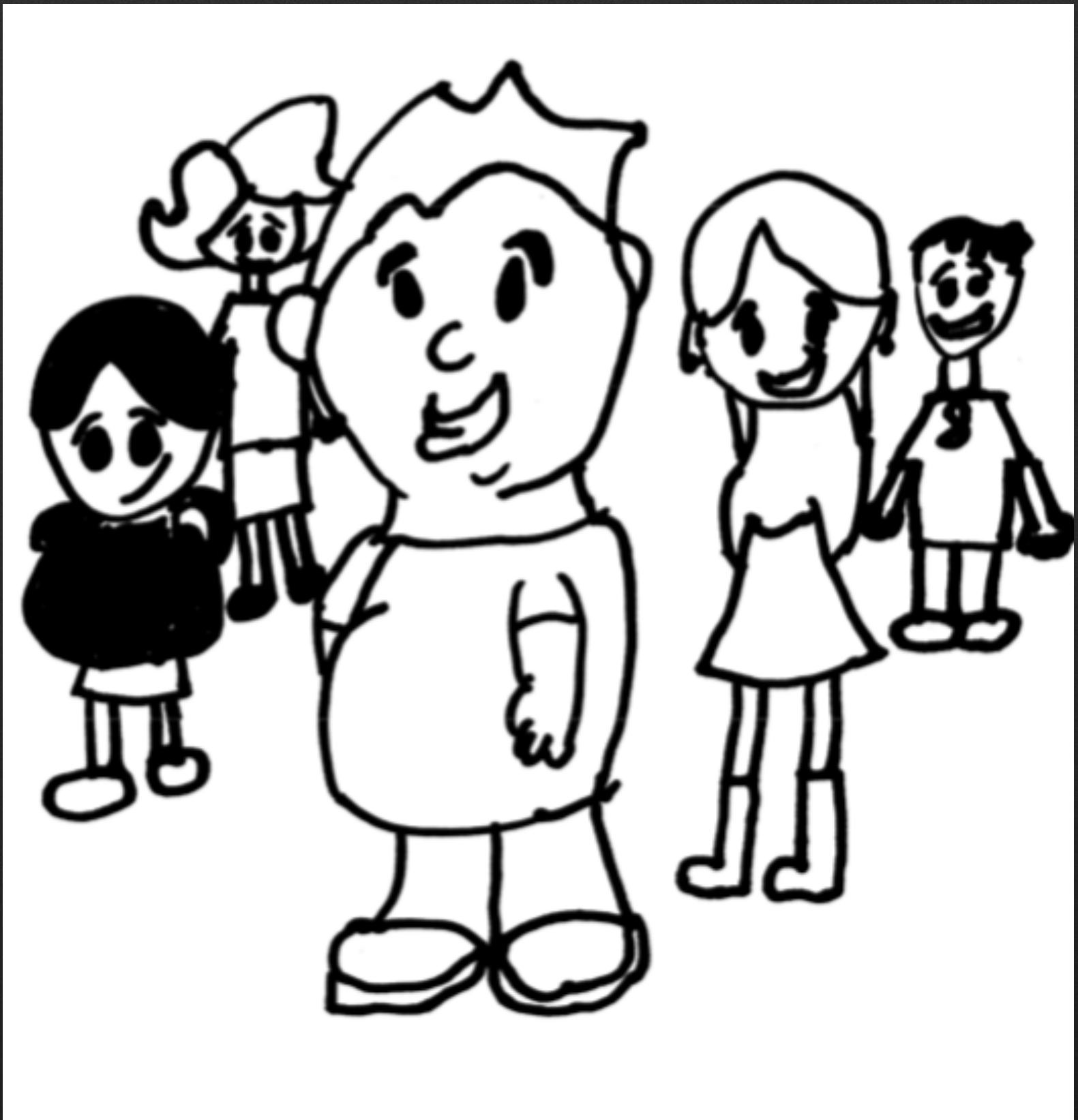
My younger brother Curtis did all of the illustrations for the book. When he agreed to help, I asked him to do all of the drawings in black and white. This is because I wanted to give all of the people who read this book to be able to place themselves in the text and relate to the story. The black and white cartoon drawings prevent assumptions about race, eye color, hair color, and types of clothing worn. This allows children to insert their imagination and experiences into how they see the characters. Feel free to color on these pages and make it your own.

Bilingual Texts

It is hard to find bilingual children's books that go back and forth between two languages. Usually the same thing is repeated, once in each language. However, that is not the reality for most bilingual people. I wanted to create a book that celebrates a person's ability to use more than one language in context.

Now go on and enjoy Becoming Familia. I hope you love the story!

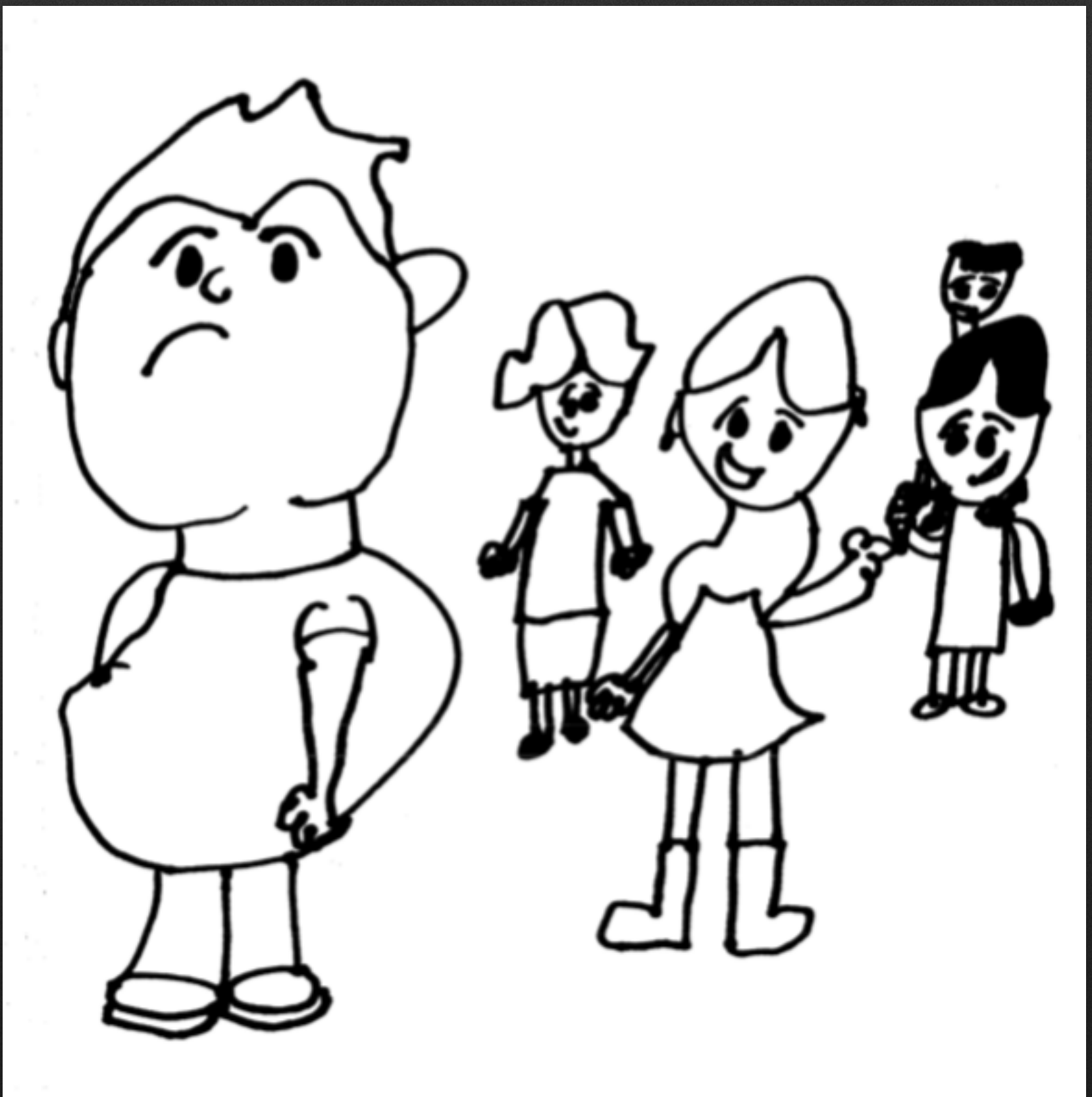
- Carolyn



“Hi my name is Leo, and esta es mi familia. Somos un poco diferentes, y tenemos una historia única. But at the end of the day, we are a family founded in amor, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“People find their families in different ways. Some are born into their family, some are adopted, some are brought in by marriage, and some find their families in other ways. Esta es la historia de mi camino a descubrir lo que significa familia para mí.





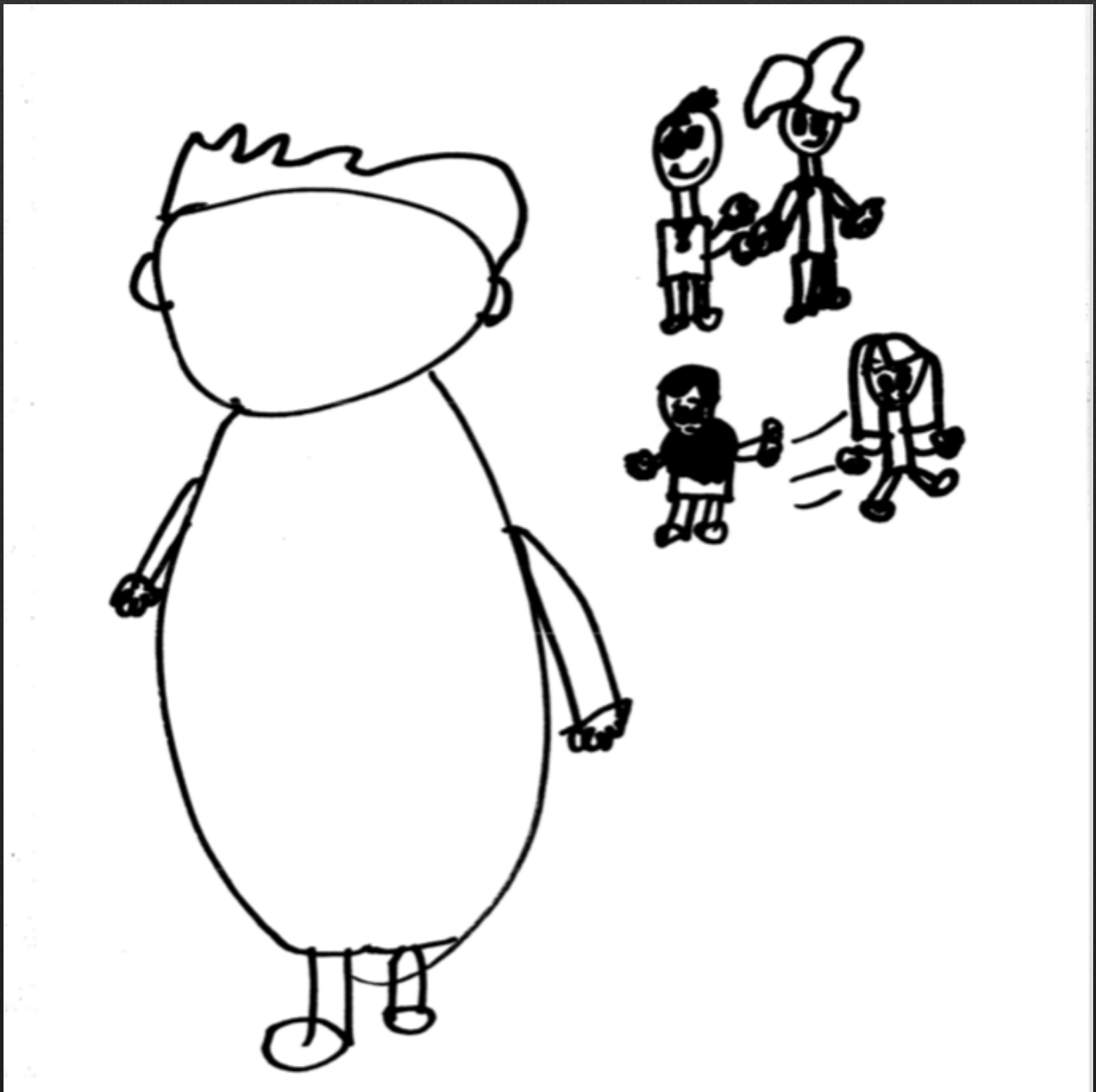
“These people... me han invitado a vivir con ellos. This is supposed to be a family, but they are not like me.”

“No hablamos ni el mismo idioma, ni comemos las mismas comidas, ni tenemos la misma apariencia. How will I ever consider this my family?”



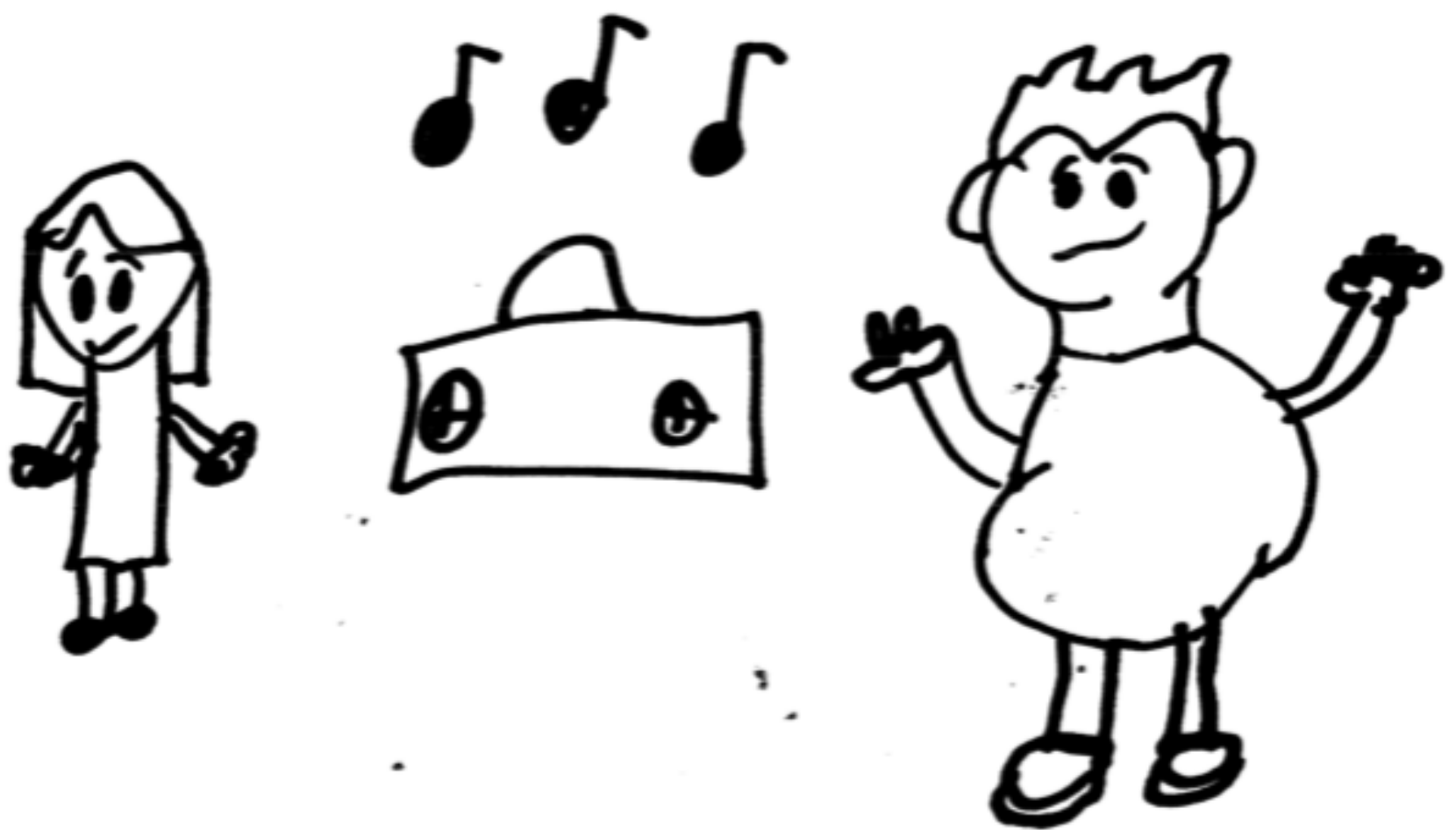
The background is a black and white line drawing. At the top, there are several geometric shapes: a series of parallel lines on the left, a rectangle in the center, and a spiral on the right. Below these, a wavy line separates them from a series of small dots. The bottom half of the image is dominated by two large, stylized faces. The face on the left has a large, open mouth and a spiral for an eye. The face on the right has a large, open mouth and a spiral for an eye, with a wavy line below it. The text "Pero..." is centered in a dark rectangular box.

Pero...

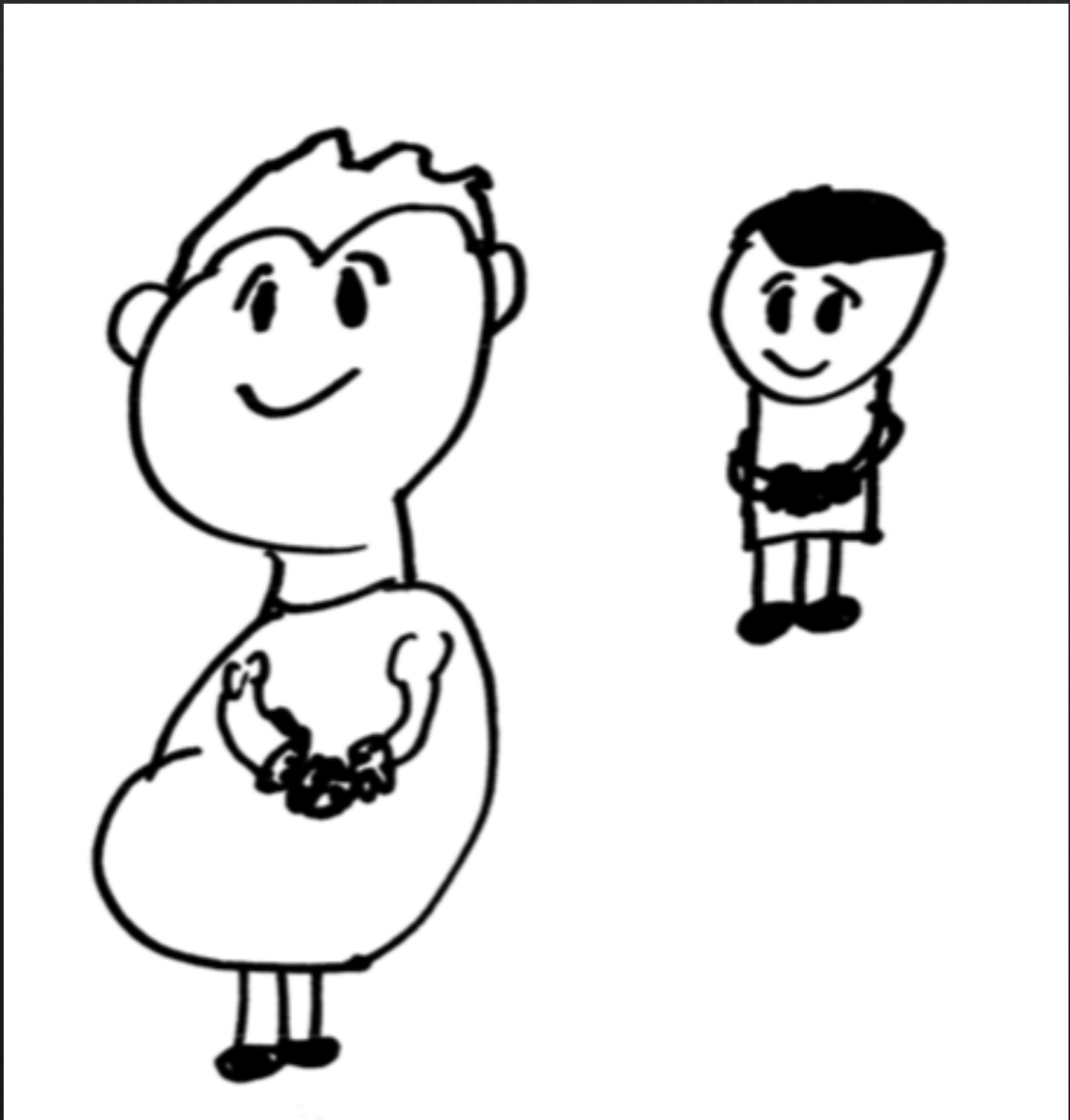


“I guess they aren’t that bad... or that different.”

“A la hermana y a
mí nos gusta la misma
música.”



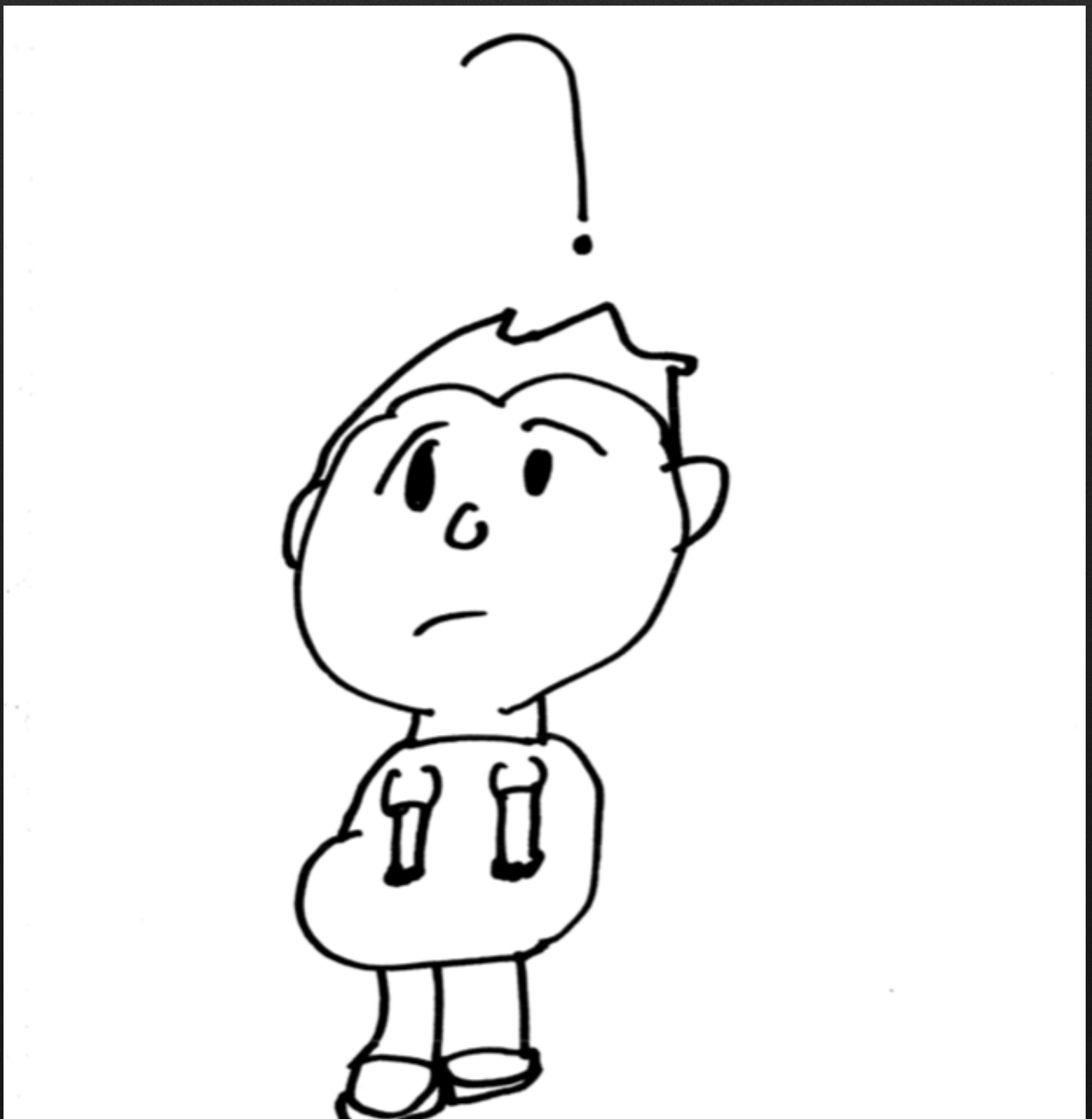
“The brother and I like the
same games.”

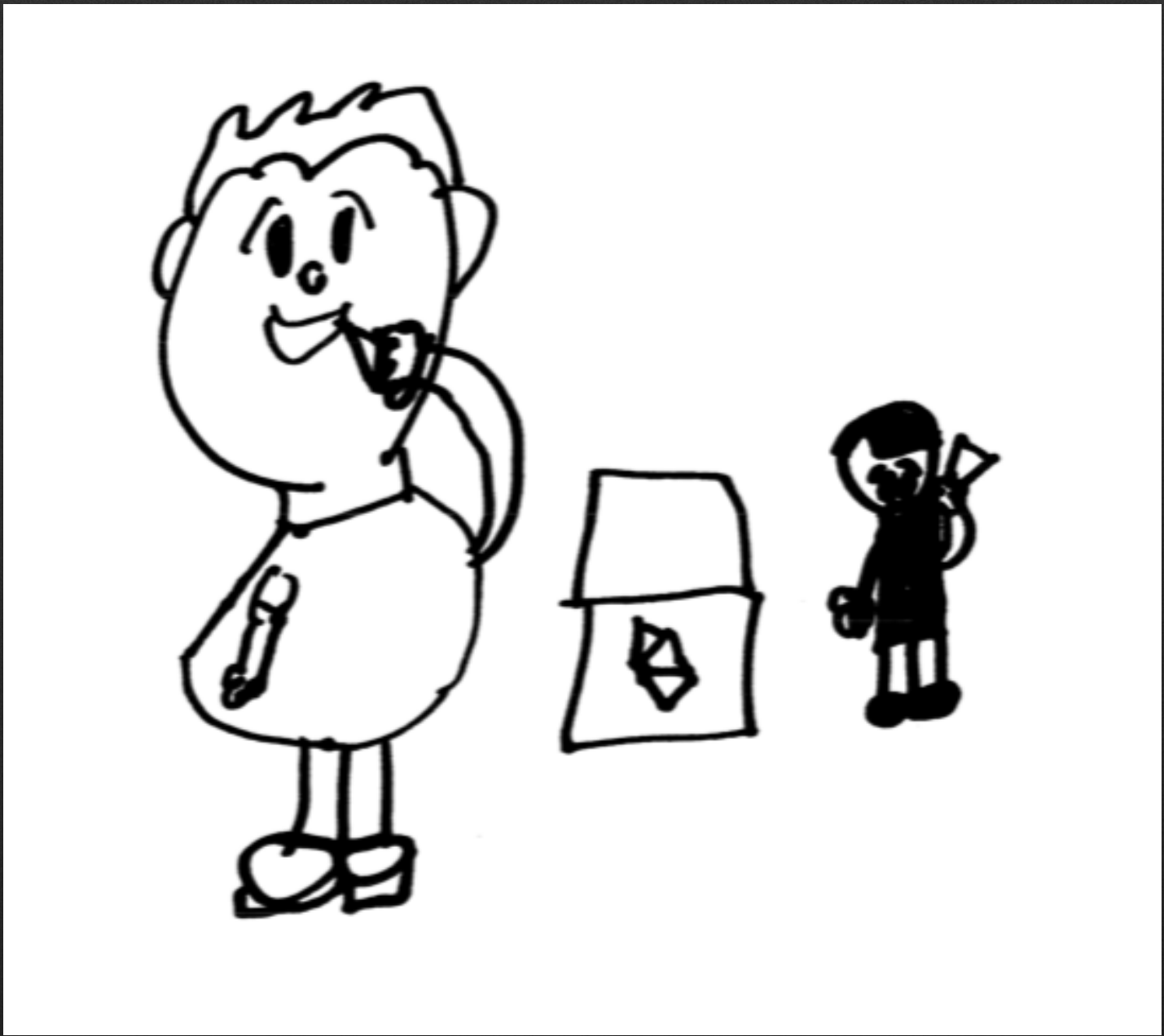




“Los padres abrazan como yo.”

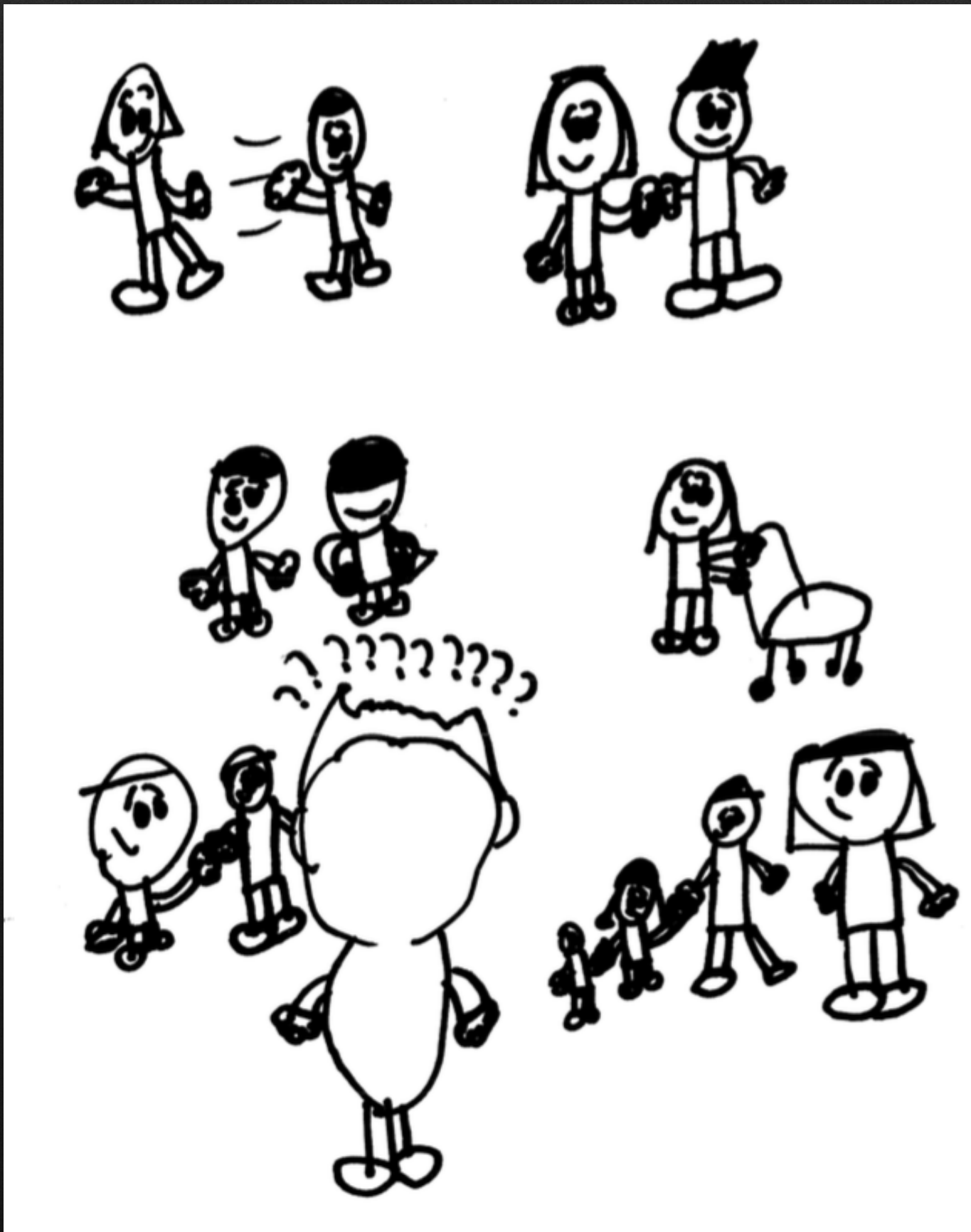
“We are diferente, pero
also we are the same.”





“My brother likes pepperoni on pizza, and I like crusts so we trade and both get more of what we like.”

“Todas estas personas
hacen una familia aunque
son diferentes.”





I wonder... “¿Es posible que esta sea mi familia?”



The woodkuffs family



About the Woodruff Family

The Woodruff Family was brought together in November of 2007 when Curtis joined the family through adoption. Now, there are 4 kids, Carolyn, Courtney, Corey and Curtis, along with parents Mark and Desiree. They have lived all over the Midwest, and have friends and family everywhere. The family currently resides in Zionsville, Indiana with their dog Oscar, and two cats, Oreo and Shadow.

The oldest child, Carolyn, and youngest Curtis, worked together to create this book to tell a story based On their family's experience.

